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ABSTRACT

This paper asserts that a modern elementary classroom, in which broadly based international perspectives are fostered and global understanding realized, is one in which the teacher, as a co-learner in the experience, is prepared to negotiate and exchange power with students. The paper explores how this shift in teaching philosophy toward active learning may be a requisite next stage in the evolution of the teaching of social studies. Brief descriptions of active learning in classrooms in Italy and England conclude the paper. (EV)

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A Need for Active Learning: A Cross-cultural Perspective

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The Bradley Commission Report on History in Schools suggests that the typical American elementary social studies curriculum is narrow, restrictive, and does not engender a global awareness fitting for our modern world. Subsequent research has indicated that the social studies curriculum of the 2000's should be expanded to include language arts, world languages, literature, science, and international education.

But the fact that we are having trouble broadening our social studies curricula may not reflect an underlying problem in what we teach, but rather, of how we teach. Changes fundamental to our educational philosophy are in order; breadth, and diversity in the teaching of social studies, and indeed other subjects, will come as a natural byproduct of these changes. This idea is not new. In fact, many of the educational initiatives of recent years, such as whole language, integrated language arts, standards based mathematics, have carried with them the corollary of a primary need for a change in teaching techniques. As a result, educators have encountered new teaching strategies like independent and cooperative group-work, personalized learning, and child-focused, experiential learning. But just how does a teacher go about integrating

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diverse perspectives of the world into a single, unified elementary social studies experience? What fundamental change in our beliefs about education is in order?

We certainly do not have a complete answer to this complex question, but if there were one we believe it would manifest itself cross-culturally. Having studied preschools and primary schools in England, Italy and Cuba, one can see at least a partial answer emerging: the concept I have termed "heuristic conviction." Despite their obvious political, social, and economic differences, the preschool systems if these three cultures have at least one philosophical element in tune with each other; what is know here in the United States, roughly, as "hands on, minds on learning."

The notion of instilling heuristic conviction, or promoting active learning, involves us as educators in that one must decide how far students should go in taking an active and participatory role in their learning and how far one should go in controlling over the curriculum and its outcomes. These two processes of participation and control are distinct in that it is perfectly possible for a teacher to retain control over the structure of a lesson, while, at the same time, encouraging students to be actively involved in their own learning. A teacher may achieve this balance by centering class time around partially structured questions-and-answer sessions, or around carefully selected, interactive appropriate computer software or educational game challenges. These sorts of activities strike a balance between teacher-influenced organization and student-

based autonomy. I am reminded of a preschool in Reggio Emilia, Italy, where the teacher is regarded as an artist whose pedagogical role is to conduct the classroom as one would an orchestra; that is, bring out the melody of children freely creating, thinking, and expressing themselves in a "hundred languages."

What is bothersome to many people about active learning is the issue of control. In active learning, control of the classroom is shifted along with a continuum in favor of the students and away from the teacher. This calls for certain changes, which are difficult for some to make. Traditionally, we have always asked children to sit still and be quiet, especially while we are transmitting knowledge to them. But active learning, that is, hands- on, minds - on, learning requires that children talk and move about, continuously; it requires their constant interaction and engagement. Active learning is manifested when children discover learning, perhaps through their multiple intelligences, by actually constructing meaning and relevance. Our goal as reflective practitioners, then, becomes not one of organizing and controlling the classroom, but one of ensuring that children organize and maintain their own classroom. This means that teachers need to re-think the notion of predetermining goals and objectives for students. This sort of shared decision-making, or "curriculum negotiation," involves students and teachers, together as equals, brainstorming, interviewing each other, building consensus together, and mutually questioning each other's thinking and feelings.

This active mode of learning had radical implications for the traditional role of the teacher as the disseminator of knowledge. Philosophically, active learning as I have seen it in both England and in Cuba, is the polar opposite of the teacher dominated lecture. Active learning demands that we surrender our assumed expertise in our subject in deference to the varied and unique learning processes of our students. The teacher becomes a facilitator in the learning process, a resource, an enthusiast, but not an authority on any subject matter.

A functional example of such an open-ended and free flowing experience is one that I observed in northern Italy. Under the careful guidance of their teachers, these children moved their classroom outside, where they studied the two lion statues of their city square. The children had wondered who put the lion statues there in the first place, and when, and what they meant. They began to think about why lions were chosen and not dogs or cows. The children were inspired to read more about lions, and to ask questions to anyone who might know something about the lions in the piazza. Over time, the children drew, painted, made models, and wrote poetry about the lions, raising their perceptions of the lions to unbelievable heights of expression. They began to generate their own ideas about how and why the lions were placed there. They created their own myths. For the children, the lion statues became tangible symbolic representations of the town and its history. As someone in town noted," before the lions were alone in the square; now they belong to every

child." The six-week lion study culminated in a video entitled "A Portrait of the Lions," an effort to preserve the experience, because the teachers insisted that they were learning as much as their students.

Similarly, schools in England have for years allowed children to influence the direction of their own learning. I our observations of English primary schools we have frequently observed children, of their own initiative, engage in such activities as traffic counts, community surveys, oral histories, and environmental studies. I observed a group of children in Gloustershire, England try to recreate their village history by interviewing the townspeople, everyone from the school cook, to local craftspeople, to town officials, to occasional passers-by. The students found it more interesting to compile information about their village by visiting nearby landmarks and by looking at actual artifacts in museums than by reading lifeless secondary sources and history texts. In the end, they ended up writing their own history, a giant bound scrapbook that unraveled two thousand years of the village's past.

So what are the benefits of active, hand-on, minds-on learning? It is argued that since the active learner constructs his or her own knowledge, the student is more motivated to learn. Active learners are required to make decisions and to assume responsibility for the consequences of their actions. Moreover, active students develop the desire to learn for their own benefit and not for the sake of the teacher. The desire to learn for one's own growth and discovery is not transmittable concept; one must discover it actively, individually.

A modern sensitive and responsive elementary classroom, where broadly based international perspectives are fostered and global understandings realized, is one where the teacher, as a co-leader in the experience, is prepared to negotiate and exchange power with the students. This shift in our teaching philosophy, in our belief system, toward active learning may be a requisite next stage in the evolution of our teaching of social studies. But active learning, like democracy, needs to be appreciated, accepted, and practiced before it will become a common part of schools in the United States.

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